

HENRI JOVA INTERVIEW

DATE: February 26, 2003

SPEAKERS: Interviewee HENRI JOVA
Interviewer Kay Hamner (QUESTION)

TOPIC: The Carter Center Oral History Project

QUESTION: It is February 26, 2003. I'm at the offices of Jova/Daniels/Busby on Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia, interviewing Henri Jova.

We want to go back to when you first became involved with design issues with President and Mrs. Carter. And I believe that predates them actually designing the Center, doesn't it? To maybe the time they did the offices in the Russell Building?

HENRI JOVA: That's right; that was our first – we'd known each other, but that was the first time we had any professional conversations.

QUESTION: Do you know how you came to be involved in that project, with the offices at the Russell Building?

HENRI JOVA: Well, I think having known both Jimmy and Rosalynn, they gained a certain knowledge about me, and respected my taste and so on. They were a little bit dismayed at leaving Washington and coming to what was really a very, uh – let's say, undernourished background. And they called on me and us to see if we could sort of fix it up and make it a little bit more appropriate. It was a challenge, and we enjoy working on challenges. And especially working with President and Mrs. Carter on such a challenge.

QUESTION: The budget for that, did that come out of the traditional transition fund an outgoing President gets?

HENRI JOVA: I – I think it did. I'm not sure how it was actually funded. I know that we were – we were instructed to be very, shall we say, cautious in any suggestions that we made. We certainly were not – it was not an overwhelming job, but I think we did improve the look of the place and I think that made for a more comfortable environment.

QUESTION: So then, we get to the design of what's known as The Carter Center, or The Carter Presidential Center. Now, I believe the circular concept originated with Chris Hemmeter, is that --?

HENRI JOVA: It was, yes. It did.

QUESTION: And so, at what point did you and your firm become involved in the design process?

HENRI JOVA: We had competed with three other firms, and were sort of runners-up on it. He was – the President and Mrs. Carter were not terribly thrilled. They did not see any of the solutions that came out of the design competition as being precisely what they wanted. This is a natural result in many competitions, because people compete on the basis of general knowledge, and not on a specific program.

So it's very difficult for any architect or firm to come up with something that the client feels, "Gee, this is it." And I think that this dismayed them, and made them a little bit reluctant to make a choice.

QUESTION: May I interrupt to ask – can you tell me a little bit about what the concept was that you put forth in that competition?

HENRI JOVA: Well, it was quite different from the circular theme that we ended up with. But it – it did contain many of the concerns that they had about placing a major facility on that site in that environment. So we felt that we were on the way to solving some of their problems.

Then they came up with the scheme that Hemmeter had suggested, and that did seem to please them. And they asked us if we would work with his architect in developing that scheme. We went into that with a certain amount of trepidation. In a way, it was a matchmaker's-made marriage, and you never know whether you're going to hit it off or not. Actually, we started out by working for a trial week together, and it turned out that we had a very – a good understanding of each other's aims. And eventually it turned out to be a marriage made in heaven.

QUESTION: Well, as I understand it, the firm that – was, now the firm Lawton, Umemura & Yamamoto – I hope I'm somewhat close to pronouncing that after all those years.

HENRI JOVA: Yamamoto.

QUESTION: I still struggle over it a bit. They were the firm that primarily designed Mr. Hemmeter's hotels that he developed right?

HENRI JOVA: Yes, he had used them over and over again. I mean, he was sort of the court architect for the Hemmeter company.

QUESTION: Well, in the early days when you all began the design, how did people envision the facility being used? I've been at The Carter Center more than sixteen years now, so I know very well, we use it in ways that were not intended for it to be used. But I've always been curious about just how were you all told to design?

HENRI JOVA: Well, The Center – most Presidential Centers really do not have a very active daily life. They are a repository of the archives for the administration and so on. And the opposition to putting it in that location was depending on that as a -- as a misapprehension, really. They said, "Well, this will not be used; it won't require all this parking, and it will be detrimental to the neighborhood." And all of that turned out to be 180 degrees wrong.

President Carter turned out to be the best post-President we have ever had. And his vision of using the Center as a springboard for all of his continuing activities worldwide was absolutely a godsend to the – to the city, to the area, and certainly to the concept of a Presidential center. It gave it vitality that no other Presidential center has had.

QUESTION: But I don't believe anyone, including President and Mrs. Carter, at that time envisioned it would be as big and as active as it has grown in the last twenty years. I say, as the person who runs the facilities, we've been challenged just by the number of activities that take place there. And I understand that it was always going to be action-oriented, but perhaps Emory was going to play a bigger role than it perhaps plays now? Was that the case when you first began?

HENRI JOVA: That is the case, and of course, nobody expected that the activities would outgrow the locus in the way it did. You know, Kay, as well as anybody, that the amount of traffic and the amount of usages has made it – well,

I won't say inadequate, but it made it very difficult to handle the activities and the crowds that are entertained there. All in all, it's a success story that makes us very proud and very happy that we had something to do with it.

QUESTION: It might interest you to know – I don't know whether I mentioned this to Stanley, either – the current Board of Trustees has laid out a mandate that one of the caps, if you will, on future growth, will be the size of our current facilities.

They feel that these facilities are the appropriate home for The Carter Center, and that The Carter Center should not expand its activities beyond what its home base can take care of. Except to the extent that there are programs abroad, with people housed abroad. But we would not be taking – buying other buildings or try to do anything like that and expanding off campus or anything like that.

So there has been a conscious effort now, instead of trying to always make the facilities fit the activities, it's now more seeing that the activities could be accommodated by the facilities.

HENRI JOVA: I think that's a wise choice and a wise course to take, because after all, the thing that is so wonderful about The Center, is the fact that the Carters have a hands-on role in the scope of these activities. And if that kept getting larger and larger, it would place more and more of a burden on them, and after all, in spite of his recent fellowship and so on, he is human.

QUESTION: That's correct. And I think – and also, for the last five years, there's been a concerted effort for the Center to identify which of the activities are the strongest in terms of being able to survive him, rather than just continuing to add more and more programs – to take those few and really concentrate on them while he was here, to ensure that they were strong enough to survive when he's not with us.

HENRI JOVA: There's been a lot of good thinking --

QUESTION: About that. There certainly has been. It might interest you to know, too, that from time to time, meeting planners have mentioned to us that they thought we should update some of the color schemes, and what have you in The Carter Center. But whenever I have broached that subject with Mrs. Carter, she's adamant about wanting things kept as close to the original as possible.

Some of the changes that I have wanted to make were simply in terms of the use The Center has. For example, instead of the solid-colored carpet, going to a carpet that had a little bit of pattern that didn't show the soil.

HENRI JOVA: -- showing some of the traffic.

QUESTION: Yes. And she has finally allowed that this year to happen, but the colors in that are still from the original. So she is still very pleased with that – it stood the test of time with her, after twenty years.

HENRI JOVA: Well, there's been a continual renewal, and there have been changes along the way, but I think the fact that the changes have been subtle enough so that she is comfortable, and he too – is comfortable with the fact that it still projects the same image that it always has.

QUESTION: Well, in the beginning -- I know that your firm was involved later down the road, when we did what became known as the Ivan Allen Pavilion – but as I understand it, the original plans always called for an additional circle pavilion. Do you remember that? That would have been before I came there.

HENRI JOVA: I think it was laid out in the abstract, but it was only an abstract possibility. I mean, there was no programmatic reason for it at that time. I think later on, by the time we did that new pavilion, the demand for the new pavilion had grown immensely, and we had to – while it adheres to the same circular dynamic, there's a lot more functional space packed into it than there is in any of the other pavilions.

QUESTION: That's true. It's been a challenge to keep the auditorium or the chapel occupied by outside clients, given some of the restrictions that are placed on its use by that. So I want to skip back to the early days, and then move forward to the Ivan Allen Pavilion, because I do have some questions we want to get on record about that design.

But then, we started with the four circles then – the one that was going to contain the library?

HENRI JOVA: Yes.

QUESTION: Now, the one that contains the library and museum, who was it that you worked with? Was it the federal government that pretty well knew what they wanted?

HENRI JOVA: Yes, they were pretty definite in their program requirements. We worked very closely with them. Of course, there was a great deal of input from the President and Mrs. Carter, because they felt that although this was a separate entity, it was a part of the Carter Presidential Center, and they wanted a very seamless adjacency. And I think that we were able to control the color palette and so on, so that you felt that you were still in the same complex.

QUESTION: That's true. I know one of the questions that the maintenance staff has raised from time to time – it's over on the library, in the library building, that the chilled water that cools the private – the first three pavilions – private pavilions come from. And they've wondered about, was it the vision that somehow all of those pavilions were going to be run by the government or what, that made the mechanical systems be so dependent on one another, rather than as two separate systems financed in two different ways.

HENRI JOVA: I don't think that was the controlling or the driving – I think that economy and efficiency were what drove it. I don't believe there was ever any intent that different pavilions would be ceded to the government or vice versa.

QUESTION: I see. So it was always, from the beginning, that one pavilion would be the government's and the others would be private.

HENRI JOVA: Right.

QUESTION: Always. At one point did EDAW [Incorporated] become involved. You all brought EDAW into the picture?

HENRI JOVA: Yes, we did. Very early on. Because, although we were greatly interested in the landscape environment, we do not have a landscape design department per se. EDAW worked with us on our competition entry. And so it was logical that we called on them to help us in the final – and I think they've done a wonderful job.

QUESTION: I can say I agree with that. The reason I bring this up now is, I've heard it said through the years that it was always meant that one side of the lake would be public, and the other side of the lake – the buildings on the other side of the lake – would be the private part of the facility. So was that – is your recollection part of that?

HENRI JOVA: No, I don't recall that being defined in that way, exactly. I think it was more a matter of usage and custom. The lower lake was always visualized as being a facility that the public would have access to, and indeed, one does see people fishing there and so on. And I think that President Carter relished that idea. He wanted the place to be a very accessible facility.

QUESTION: We eventually did have to put up a fence there because – so often, when President Carter was holding meetings in what became the Cyprus Room, he would look up, and the general public would be lined up outside the windows staring in at him. And so finally one day, he called me and said, "Despite the fact we like to have people use the entire grounds, that's just too disruptive to our meetings, we're going to have to do something about that."

The interior design – I know that you're particularly known, yourself, for your work on interior design. Did you find the circular concept particularly difficult to work with, in terms of providing what they said they needed to have provided within those circles?

HENRI JOVA: Well, circular buildings and circular spaces always present peculiar problems. We consider the problems are solvable, and in fact, difficult but challenging problems that frequently lend themselves to more exciting and more satisfying solutions.

QUESTION: How involved were the Carters in the initial phases? I know that when we built the Ivan Allen pavilion, we met with them several times, but it wasn't as frequent as people might have imagined. I mean, you presented ideas and they liked them or they didn't like them, and they said what they didn't. But somehow I believe that maybe, when you built the original facility, you saw them more frequently. Is that true?

HENRI JOVA: Well, yes, of course. They were much more involved. We had many meetings; some of them in our own office. It was very exciting for our staff to see all those Secret Service people with their little earplugs and so on. But we had a very genial relationship and we bounced ideas off of them, and I must say, they bounced some ideas back off of us. We considered that we melded those ideas with our ideas, and I think that the results are still very satisfactory.

QUESTION: How would you define President and Mrs. Carter's taste? And what I mean by that is, I think most of us in the general public look at things and tend to put a label that says, "Contemporary" or "Traditional" or "Classical" or something – those kinds of labels we tend to put on things. How would you define their taste as they expressed it in this design process?

HENRI JOVA: I think that they were not – many of our clients are living beyond their means intellectually and taste-wise. These clients were not. They were very – they wanted a very low-key environment; they willingly saw that the

circular concept and today's economy and so on, made a certain amount of –
made contemporary solutions make sense.

On the other hand, we – both the architects and interior designers and the Carters felt that they were coming from Washington; there should be a certain gracious statesmanlike atmosphere. And what we intended to do was to bring that requirement into the present-day, and into the present-day's type budget.

So consequently, you will notice, there's very little expensive molding detail and so on, but there's just enough suggestion of moldings, and enough ceiling height and material selection to project that image.

QUESTION: You already had the circular concept to work with.

HENRI JOVA: Yes.

QUESTION: But given that, were there other structures or buildings or anywhere from which you drew inspiration for your work there?

HENRI JOVA: No, I think we had a pretty – a pretty wide field to select from. And I think what we intended to do was bound our selections by – by the realm of taste. And we attempted to give them something that they would be comfortable with and that would not exceed – they would have little or no justifications to make to a public in case that should arise.

It never really arose.

QUESTION: No. No, not – I don't get asked those questions specifically about the cost of building it. Every now and then, someone will ask, "Well, how much of my tax money goes to keeping the place up?" Which is, "None," except for the government part of it.

HENRI JOVA: Yes. I think that's astounding to most people, is the fact that all of that was paid for by private --

QUESTION: By private funds, right. And it's maintained, for the most part, by private funds. The government provides some money to help maintain the grounds, but that's only about 20 percent of the budget for the grounds. The maintenance budget is raised totally from private funds there.

HENRI JOVA: I'm always very surprised and thrilled at the degree of

maintenance, and the fact that it has not deteriorated and does not show any wear and tear.

QUESTION: Well, thank you. I'll take that as a compliment. We work very hard at that there with minimal staff and budget, as you know. But the materials that you all selected, the materials in themselves, have stood the test of time. The carpet has had to be replaced three times, because of simple wear. I mean, nobody expected a hundred thousand people a year to travel across that. But wall coverings are still the original wall coverings. The paint – now, we do paint about every week, we just about have to touch up paint frequently. But all of that is - we're just now beginning to look at replacing some of the wall coverings that finally have some stains that we can't get out. So the materials were very long-wearing, in addition to being very attractive materials.

HENRI JOVA: Well, we're pleased that you say that.

QUESTION: I was going to get back to the Ivan Allen pavilion. That was a challenging project as well, given the fact that the chapel was to be the dominant feature there, and office space was badly needed and as much of that had to be squeezed in to what was left of that. But can you tell us a little bit about – well, I'll go on record with that -- I know what happened, but for the record – how that design process played itself out.

HENRI JOVA: Well, of course, we had a challenge in that the main space was to be a chapel at times, but a meeting room and assembly hall at other times. We had to walk a fine line between making it too practical and too public in its appearance. By judicious selection of furnishings and colors and lighting, I think we were able to make a space that could be considered very, shall we say, introspective and chapel-like. But by flicking a different set of lights on and pulling a few curtains, it could become a public forum. That was a fine line that we had to walk, and I hope we've walked it so that we've made no enemies in either camp.

QUESTION: It's used by the programs of The Carter Center a lot, and it's become a popular place for some of the corporations in town to have meetings as well.

HENRI JOVA: Yes.

QUESTION: And of course, the office space is there as we need it as well. I believe, though, that the building had to be sited slightly differently than how it originally had been thought – that that final round circle would go. Something about the way the roadway finally ended up going?

HENRI JOVA: Yes, perhaps, but it really is more or less in the original location. It had to be rotated somewhat in order to be able to provide the right orientation for that chapel and meeting room, which does face east. President Carter occasionally has used it for a morning ceremony, and it's thrilling for the audience that he is speaking to, to see the sun come up directly opposite the dais, and I think as layers of drapery are opened and that sun comes up, it is an experience that nobody forgets.

QUESTION: It is, really. To go back to the early days, 1984-1985, and the roadway. To your recollection, did the controversy around the roadway slow down or impact the construction schedule for the facility?

HENRI JOVA: No, I don't think so. I think it was a hard-fought battle and I think one of the things we attempted to do at President Carter's request was to submerge a certain – as much as possible – some of the area of the building so that it presents a very much, shall we say, low-key image to people driving around on the outside. I don't know that we would have done, really, anything differently. The landscaping certainly is so attractive, that I think that any prior conceptions to what it was going to look like were abated considerably by the time it got built and landscaped.

QUESTION: Were you, as the architect, required to meet with any of the neighborhood groups or anything like that?

HENRI JOVA: Yes, to a certain extent, we were called upon.

QUESTION: Were they difficult meetings?

HENRI JOVA: Some of them. Some of them. But you know, we had very broad shoulders. We'd been up against zoning preconceptions many times, and we're used to a certain amount of fisticuffs – verbal, fortunately.

QUESTION: During the course of that design work, because it was envisioned that Emory University would be playing a larger role in The Center than perhaps has happened over time, did they have much input in the design work?

HENRI JOVA: No, not really. They, I think, took it for granted that –

although Emory University was involved, that it was The Jimmy Carter Presidential Center, and that he was really left in charge of the design.

QUESTION: So there weren't any requirements from the academic side as to their needs or anything that would have had to be taken into account?

HENRI JOVA: Not that I can recall.

QUESTION: I had heard that it was envisioned that that second building – the rotunda area there – would be a library? Do you recall that? It has some bookcases around, between the columns?

HENRI JOVA: Yeah. Well, that room was always designed as sort of a flexible space, and it's become more flexible. But the idea was that it would be used as a press assembly room when there were important goings-on, but it also had to be convertible into a luncheon room, a dining – a place for formal dining – just a plain meeting room. It has functioned that way, as you know, many times and many different ways. It was never – there are lots of bookcases, because it was always assumed that the Presidential – the personal Presidential archives and book collections and so on would continue growing. And a lot of them have taken over.

QUESTION: That's true. The President and Mss. Carter have given – continue, I think, to give some of the books they receive every year --

HENRI JOVA: Exactly.

QUESTION: -- both to The Center, and some go to the college, Georgia Southwestern, the college down in Americus. Otherwise, I think we would have run out of space by now.

HENRI JOVA: We'd need another pavilion.

QUESTION: Right. Well, as you may recall, I think that we have used up all of the land that we had acquired for the pavilions. There's no way we could move onto that particular site anything else there.

Do you have any anecdotes or stories that you just happened to think of, off the top of your head, going back to when you were involved with the design, that would just be interesting bits of information?

HENRI JOVA: No, I can't really think of any particular one. We treasure all of the experiences that we had, and I won't say that they were all serious. There were a lot of – there's a lot of camaraderie, and we enjoyed that. And I like to think that they enjoyed working with us.

QUESTION: Yes. Well, I'll tell you, the process here is that we take this interview and it's transcribed. And it's sent to you, and you can make any changes on that transcript – if you want to delete or change anything before you send it back, along with a form that we send you.

HENRI JOVA: To release it, yes.

QUESTION: Sometimes when I read the transcript, I see areas that I'd like to have somebody expand upon. And if I see questions – that there are more questions that I would like to ask, I would call and ask if we could have a little more of your time.

HENRI JOVA: The only changes I might want to make are redundancy and repetition, which we're all guilty of at times.

QUESTION: I think one of the more interesting things that you told us about – I think that in future years, people are really going to be interested in knowing about the personalities and characters of President and Mrs. Carter, and the fact that in the design of the Center, they are – if I can sum up maybe what you were saying – they were not going to have anything pretentious.

HENRI JOVA: That's right. That was really the main dictate from our clients: we don't want anything overblown.

QUESTION: So that's a little bit of an insight that confirms a lot of what has been said elsewhere about their characters.

HENRI JOVA: Yes. I think so. They were not McMansion-type clients.

QUESTION: I'm sorry, say that again?

HENRI JOVA: They were not McMansion clients.

QUESTION: No. No, they're certainly not. They're certainly not. Well, thank you again.

[End of Recording]